

Chapter 14: Skill Test

Zena Garibaldi stepped away from the computer screen.

Her eyes were tired, dry and itchy; she'd been either studying images on the screen or through a microscope for hours. She knew what she was doing was hopeless; they just didn't have the correct base to start from. But she was determined to keep trying, however hopeless it might seem.

As soon as she and Anton had arrived, they had left the others and were brought to the Research Centre. Here they marveled at the vast array of equipment available. Every conceivable machine was installed, and all in pristine condition. The first day they spent cataloging what was now at their command then, while Anton began to design the research methodology they would need, Zena had started to see what they had to work with.

'It's hopeless, it's just not here,' she screamed to no-one in particular. Zena was tired, she hadn't slept since arriving and she knew she needed to sleep, desperately needed to sleep. She saved her work, shut the system down and left the room, heading for their apartment and bed. Anton met her in the corridor, the bags under his eyes telling a similar story.

'Time to rest,' he said his voice croaky with exhaustion. Hand in hand they trudged back to the elevator. The door opened onto the main foyer of the accommodation area, neither saw the group of people on the opposite side, their only goal was to reach their apartment and sleep for several hours.

Reg saw Zena and Anton and immediately recognized the signs; he turned to his companions. 'I think we should let them rest, I don't think either of them could put two words together, coherently, at the moment.'

Thom agreed. 'Good, time for some training and evaluation, who's up for it?'

Reg took his leave and the others followed Thom to a different set of elevators, took one and dropped quickly to the lower levels. The door opened and they exited into a large concrete area. It was open and looked like a parade ground, but it was much more.

'First,' Thom said, 'wardrobe. You all need kitting out.' He turned and strode towards the far wall, through a door and into a smaller change room. 'Right,' Thom grunted as he opened a large cupboard to his right. 'Ladies, if you would come here.'

He quickly glanced at each. 'Bonny you're what a twelve?' He asked as he selected a set of combat fatigues, he gave Alison the once over and selected another set the same size. 'Over there, change there, put your stuff in a locker.'

'Why do we need this crap?' Alison asked.

'Because you're not going on my range dressed like that, I'd hate to see that cute arse of yours scraped over that nasty concrete out there, now get dressed.' Thom retorted.

‘Bossy bastard!’ Alison left as a parting shot.

Clyde had chosen his own gear and dressed. Now standing in the uniform, he felt at home, like he belonged.

The training was carried out efficiently. Each weapon was selected and Thom gave a detailed instruction on stripping, cleaning and assembling it. He also gave an evaluation of their use and effectiveness including any idiosyncratic problems that almost all weapons had. Clyde, as expected, knew each weapon intimately, Bonny was almost as good and, with both having military service in their past, exactly what Thom expected.

Alison, on the other hand was a surprise package. She had none of the almost instinctive knowledge the other two had but she was a fast study and within an hour was almost as good as them. He did notice her penchant for the small, but deadly mini-Uzi, and her disdain for the larger M4. Her ability with the Fostech surprised Thom; it seemed she had already chosen her kit. Something in the back of Thom’s mind caused the hairs on the back of his neck to rise. These three appeared to be a tight, complimentary unit already.

‘Good! It seems that you all know how to strip these things, but let’s see if you can shoot them.’ Thom teased as he led them out the door and down another corridor. The range they entered was for static firing, each shooter had an enclosed range with a movable target, making it possible to test accuracy at various ranges up to 200 meters.

While the three began firing, Thom made a call, he realized time was getting away and lunch was needed. Again, Alison continued to impress, her ability and accuracy was uncanny, *definitely a natural*, the thought kept echoing in Thom’s head.

After 2 hours, Thom called a halt. ‘Clear and lock your weapons and stand back from the range.’ When the three were standing two paces from the range he stepped forward and checked each weapon. Satisfied all was correct he addressed them. ‘Good, very good,’ he looked directly at Alison. ‘You’re a surprise, you’re almost as good as these two, and believe me they have both had training, even if they can’t recall it. Now, as it’s nearly two, I think a little lunch is in order, follow me.’

Lunch was a simple affair of sandwiches and a fruit platter, but it was gratefully received by the hungry crew. Coffee followed and Thom began to discuss the next phase.

‘Next is some fun, with a very serious side. You will be put into a simulated combat scenario, you will have ten seconds to evaluate and select the weapon, or weapons you wish to use. You will then proceed onto the range; the object is to make it to the other end but, on the way you will encounter a number of obstacles and challenges.’

He smiled, or more accurately leered as he spoke. ‘There will be some bad guys, you need to take them out, and some good guys, please don’t kill them. Time is also important as there is something that must be retrieved in the time allotted. Miss the time and you fail, kill the wrong person and you fail. Now a word of advice, nobody, and I mean nobody has completed this course the first time. The standard is around five attempts, so remember you need to make it through and kill all the bad guys; ready?’

Alison was the first on her feet; Bonny and Clyde finished their coffee and fell into line behind her. They entered a small control room, windows covered the wall opposite the

door, but only blackness was visible through them. Thom went to a console, activated it and entered a series of commands, a large screen on the wall to their right burst into life.

‘This is your mission briefing, so pay attention. The building here,’ Thom tapped the console and a building illuminated, ‘is your target. You must reach it, and you have ten minutes to do so. Between you,’ again he tapped the keyboard and another building illuminated, this time at the opposite end of a narrow street from the first building. ‘Are ten, I repeat ten bad guys. Now we know some of them are holding hostages, they are all well-armed and have orders to stop anyone from getting to the target.’

‘Remember you will have ten minutes to achieve your objective, after ten minutes you fail, miss any bad guy, you fail, kill any good guy, you fail. Now, each take one of the consoles, examine the scenario, make your plan; you have ten minutes.’ He announced as he started the countdown.

Clyde was ready three minutes later, Bonny took seven but Alison needed the full ten, and it was in the last two minutes that she saw a possibility. At exactly ten minutes the screens shut down, either they had a plan or they didn’t.

‘This is an individual test, but you knew that, so please follow me, again.’ Thom led them out of the control room, down a flight of stairs. Now they each stood in front of a door. ‘Behind that door is your range, when it opens move forward to the yellow line. When I signal, the weapons safe will open and you have ten seconds to select the weapons and ammunition you want, after ten seconds the safe will close, there is no second dip. Are you ready?’

Alison’s throat was dry but she managed to croak ready, Bonny and Clyde responded the same way. Thom left and they stood, silently facing the door. Each door swung open, and the three moved to their respective yellow line. As the door closed behind, the gun safe opened, they had already decided on the weapons they wanted, and made their selection quickly.

Clyde took his loved M4, a Desert Eagle, two spare mags for the M4, four for the Eagle but only had time to grab two grenades, but he was satisfied he had enough for the task at hand.

Bonny went a different way, opting for a MP9, four spare mags and a Glock G45 with four magazines.

Alison chose her beloved mini-Uzi, six mags and nothing else, but she did have two Uzis now strapped to her. She donned her glasses and stood on the ready line.

The door opened to each range and the lights began to glow; Thom’s voice boomed from hidden speakers. ‘It’s early evening, and the light is bad, time to play.’ His voice had a cruel edge to it as he activated the scene.

Instinctively Alison ducked to her left and sprinted to an abandoned car. She took a few seconds to allow her eyes acclimatize and scanned the area. She saw a movement to her right, behind a broken window, her first encounter. She ran, doubled over to the side of the building, looked to her left and saw a figure pointing a rifle her way, she reacted and hit the target with a short burst from her left hand. Simultaneously she moved under

the window sill to the other side of the building and sent a short burst inside. Lady luck was with her, she managed to score a kill shot and no collateral damage.

She continued down the street, using debris and destroyed cars as cover. Three buildings along, her instinct told her to duck, she did and rolled to the curb just in time to see a figure in the window, but she didn't fire, something told her not to, and she was right, the figure was a child, so she kept moving. Three more times she fired, each time hitting her target; she stopped taking cover behind another wrecked vehicle, changed magazines in each gun and surveyed her surrounds before continuing.

So far she had accounted for eight of the bad guys, only two left and still three minutes on the clock. The steps leading up to the target were close, only one building on either side still to clear, she knew that a crossfire was inevitable. Carefully Alison checked the building to her left, a shadow behind a window told her there was a target there, but friend or foe, she didn't know.

The building on her side of the street was her main problem; she was close, too close to see anything, or anyone inside. Time was marching forward, only two and a half minutes to go – she had to make a choice and act.

Then she remembered some of the computer games she had played, most of the boys she knew were into combat games and this scenario seemed very familiar. In one game she had played, she had won through by thinking outside the box, now she remembered. She scanned the building ahead, noting a dark doorway just past the last window; a thin smile crossed her lips.

Alison steadied her breathing and focused on her next move. She broke from her cover, emptying the left hand Uzi into the window to her left. She ducked down and rolled under the window to her right, sliding into the doorway, she stood, ducked into the building, a door was to her left. She raised the Uzi, kicked the door with all her strength and leapt through. There was a bad guy in front of her, holding a woman and hiding behind her.

Alison fired on instinct, just as she had done in the game years previously. She fired three shots, in rapid succession. The first hit the hostages arm, but penetrated through and into the bad guy. The other two had a similar trajectory but, as the target dummies were programmed to react as would be expected, the bad guy lost his grip and the victim dummy slipped to the floor just as two rounds hit the target in the head.

Instantly the room was bathed in a red light, signaling a failure; Alison swore. 'Fuck off, I cleared the bad guys and I still have sixty seconds to get to the target.'

Thom's voice echoed through the room. 'Yeah, but you shot a hostage, automatic fail.'

Alison wasn't about to let it slide. 'Maybe if you check the dummy, you'll see it's just a flesh wound in the arm, she'd survive in the real world. The test was to not kill a hostage, just bad guys. Check your data; you'll see I've done that.' With those words, Alison spun on her heels and sprinted to out of the building and up the stairs to the target. She made it with seconds to spare.

Bonny had made similar progress to Alison, and also got caught at the final building. Being on the opposite side of the street, she had fired at the hostage situation, first. Two rounds but her first had caught the hostage, in the leg. The dummy's reaction was as designed and her second shot took the bad guy between the eyes. Another fail, and another argument would happen at de-brief.

Clyde made it through without shooting any hostage. His sixth sense had warned him that one of the two final buildings would be the usual no win scenario, so he got creative. He entered the second last building to his left and made his way to the second floor. From there he had a better view of the hostage situation and made good use of the accuracy of the M4.

One shot and the bad guy dummy's head exploded, following that shot he raced down the stairs, kicked the interconnecting door to the next building down and dispatched the single bad guy in there. He made the target with a full minute to spare.

Thom called time and instructed the participants to follow the illuminated path to the de-briefing room; he knew he was in for a discussion, or more probably an argument. When they were disarmed and sitting, he began.

'OK, one pass and two fail!' He was immediately cut off by Alison.

'Utter bullshit, my hostage would have a superficial wound to her upper arm, the bad guy was dead so, according to your parameters, I passed. I didn't kill any Hostage!' She fired at Thom and before he could speak again, Bonny added.

'And mine has a minor wound to her left leg, the bad guy is dead and, from a medical perspective, the hostage would survive without any permanent damage,' both women were glaring at him.

Clyde chose to enter the conversation. 'I'm afraid they're right, Thom. That part of the test is supposed to be a no-win scenario; but we have just shown that none of us will accept that, so I reckon they should pass.'

'Thom, do you know where that scenario came from?' Alison asked.

'No, it's part of the training system left from previous owners, if you get my drift.' He answered, cautiously.

Alison smiled. 'Well, I do. During my time at university I played a game called *Insurgent*, actually I was campus champ for those three years. That scenario is part of the game, the exact same situation and that's one of the acceptable solutions, so we win.' She placed her hands on her hips, defiantly. Thom knew they were right. His own words in the initial briefing were the key, "*no hostage is to be killed*". Also, he was aware of the solution, it was in the instructor's notes, but this was the first time anyone had got it first time. Some of his better students had failed a number of times before deciding that wounding the hostage was acceptable.

'OK, I accept that, and you're right, Alison, but nobody has ever got it this fast. Now, you've done the individual thing, let's see how you work as a team; Bonny you're team leader for the first exercise. It will be different, so keep your wits about you and follow the leader.'

Thom went back to the console, brought up the scenario and started the briefing. This time they would be in a large building, trying to rescue a hostage, with twenty bad guys to contend with. For this exercise they were given comm units. Each kept the weapons they had chosen but were allowed to collect more ammunition. When they were equipped, they stood on the ready line. This exercise was far more taxing, the building was multi story and had seen much damage, with a time limit of twenty minutes they knew they had to hustle.

Half way in, Thom called a halt and told Alison to take the lead. She did and things started to get really interesting. More bad guys were showing up and progress stalled. Time was racing by, but they were now on the top floor, the only place left for the hostage to be found.

Clyde retrieved a small telescopic mirror from his vest, extended it and slowly scanned the area before them. They had taken refuge near an old elevator shaft; the car had long ago fallen to the ground.

‘Bingo,’ Clyde hissed. ‘Found our hostage.’ He kept scanning, trying to locate the six bad guys he knew were still unaccounted for. Finally, he retracted the mirror and put it into his vest, again.

‘Here’s the situation,’ he began drawing in the dust. ‘The hostage and three guards are here,’ he placed the letter *H* for the hostage and *G* for the guards. ‘There are two more in the rafters, equipped with rifles so I think they’re snipers. That leaves one we can’t find.’ He turned to Alison, she was the leader and this was her decision.

Alison looked at the rough map Clyde had drawn, and then looked up to the top of the elevator shaft. With all the ceiling material gone from the building, she could see an access walkway running round the shaft, just below the roofline. She stuck her head through the open elevator door and quickly saw what she needed.

‘Clyde, can you climb up the service ladder to that landing?’ She asked, Clyde quickly looked inside and nodded.

‘About three minutes,’ he replied to the question she hadn’t asked.

‘Good; Bonny you skirt back around the stairwell and come at the hostage and guards from there. I’ll break cover and try to take the snipers out and draw their fire. Clyde you find that last bastard and finish him, all clear?’ Alison asked.

Both Bonny and Clyde nodded and started to move away. Alison took her position, reloaded both Uzis and waited.

Clyde in position Clyde’s voice rang in her ears. Bonny replied in the same way. Alison waited, hers was the hardest part. Break cover, try and kill the snipers and not get killed herself. She took a deep breath and raced forward toward some debris she had selected as next cover. The staccato bark from her Uzis breaking the silence, she hit one of the snipers immediately, but she missed the second. A suppressed pop from Clyde’s M4 finished that one as well. Bonny broke her cover and dropped two of the three guards, exposing the sixth man in the process.

Clyde dropped the last guard but the sixth bad guy was in a good position to kill Bonny, except that Alison wasn't having any of that. She leapt from behind her cover and propelled herself headlong at the bad guy, slamming into the dummy with a sickening thud. The dummy fell forward and she fired a short burst into it, for good measure. Bonny and Alison moved to release the Hostage, mission complete.

'Well done, and time to spare.' Thom's voice echoed from the hidden speakers. 'That's all for today, head back to the briefing room.' The de-brief was quick, all three were exhilarated at their success.

'Enough of the self-congratulations hit the showers and change. Get some rest because tomorrow is a quantum leap in difficulty and the bad guys can shoot back.' Thom called the session to an end, the three left for the showers. Alison was sore; the dummy had been more solid than she thought.

'I think I'll defer to a spa, if that's OK?' She suggested, both Bonny and Clyde had similar ideas, and aches. They did have a quick shower, just to wash off the dirt and sweat, changed and followed Thom back to the accommodation block.